



"HAVE PEN - WILL TRAVEL"

December 1, 1999

RECEIVED

Mr. John J. Usera, Executive Director  
Chiesman Foundation for Democracy  
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JUN 28 2004

Federal Communications Commission  
Office of the Secretary

Dear John:

Thank you for the "draft" report on, "Future of Media Within a Democracy".

I am afraid I remain a "doubting Thomas" regarding both the report and, especially, the process used by the Chiesman Foundation in attempting to address these complex issues. Reflecting the limited time (only two sessions, the first of which was almost exclusively laundry listing, and the second permitting at best limited deliberation), I believe the report reflects the superficial laundry listing of some of the issues. If you conduct such a process in the future, I strongly recommend that you devote at least four sessions over the course of one year to provide any serious deliberation and, thus, credibility to the process.

I also find some of the hyperbole in the introduction and under "Journalistic Standards and Responsibilities" excessive at best, if not totally misleading. As we are focusing on issues of the media, I feel it is the responsibility of all participants and, especially, the Editor to demonstrate the highest level of "free and truthful communication."

In the introduction you state that, "The condition and the quality of South Dakota media has always been commendable for meeting the information requirements of their respective communities." Anyone with even a superficial knowledge of media in South Dakota would have to disagree with this statement. The quality has been lacking at virtually all levels. For example, the vast majority of weeklies in Western South Dakota, even though they are in "Indian Country," don't even cover news of their Native American constituencies and readers. While there are rare exceptions, such as the *Timber Lake Topic* and *Todd County Tribune*, the vast majority have always found Native Americans to be virtually invisible. The void on Indian coverage was so great that Tim Giago, whatever his other flaws, launched the *Lakota Times* which later became *Indian Country Today* which he has subsequently sold. His family has just launched the *New Lakota Times*. There would be no such need for Indian media if the local county media covered "Indian affairs."

During the two sessions, many participants referred to Rapid City's daily newspaper as, "The Argus Light" or even worse, "The Rapid City Urinal," reflecting the superficiality of its coverage. Now that it has been taken over by Lee Enterprises, one receives a regurgitation of *The Washington Times* editorials much too frequently. Our major talk radio station in Western South Dakota, KOTA, has three hours of Rush Limbaugh, followed by three hours of Dr. Laura, followed by gun nut and ex-con G. Gordon Liddy with two hours in the evening. Such intensive "right wing" coverage lacks considerable balance.

Also in your introduction, you indicate that, "Individuals who were able to participate in the round table tried to be inclusive of those voices that were not in the room." This is a slippery way to get around the fact that while Ruth Yellow Hawk did an exemplary job in

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listing all the empty chairs in the first session, there were even more empty chairs in the second. I strongly suspect that the Chiesman elitist top down approach does not appeal to the grassroots leadership that was absent. Having conducted a year-long similar process with 17 sessions of grassroots and state leaders, I can assure you it can be done. I have shared both the content and process reports of how our Rural Ethnic Institute was able to accomplish solid deliberation from diverse groups. Apparently, the Chiesman Foundation chose not to seriously reach out and engage these disenfranchised citizens. As you recall from Ruth's listing, this included Native American tribal leaders, youth, labor, law enforcement, etc.

Under your "Journalistic Standards and Responsibilities," you lead with the, "Most Americans . . . are extremely reluctant to make moral judgments about other people." You and I must have grown up in very different parts of the country. I have always found Americans to be extremely moralistic and judgmental about both their fellow citizens and jingoistic about foreigners. Such rosy scenario statements are both inaccurate and add little to the credibility of the report.

There were some strengths to the process. You were successful in recruiting a good cross-section of elites, including top media leaders from the *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* and *Aberdeen American News*. Ruth Yellow Hawk's process moderation was exemplary and the professionalism of your support staff was superb in conducting the discussions themselves. However, I believe the on-site staff was boxed in by lack of serious planning and recruitment, especially of the "empty chairs."

Major West River media, i.e., the *Rapid City Journal* and KOTA, did not have representation of similar level to the *Argus Leader*, *American News*, KELO, KNBN, and KEVN TV. You list Wes Haugen, KOTA, and Doris Giago, as participants. I do not believe that I saw either of them at either session. Possibly I am wrong, or were they invited guests who did not show?

I do hope you take these comments in the constructive fashion in which they are intended. Should you desire my involvement, or that of other fellow Rural Ethnic Institute Directors in the future, I would be pleased to work with you and encourage them to do so, providing you make serious efforts at becoming inclusive with a bottom-up approach to public dialogue instead of an almost exclusively elitist top-down approach. One of our biggest historical and contemporary weaknesses in implementing democracy is the fact that so many of our institutions remain exclusively elitist and do not seriously engage the grassroots.

It has been a pleasure interacting with you personally, as well as other members of the Chiesman Foundation staff. I look forward to the possibility of working with you and your staff in the future.

Sincerest regards,

(Signed in TMK's absence to avoid delay)



Tom Katus, President  
TK Associates International, and  
Director, Rural Ethnic Institute

TMK\kmr

cc: REI Directors